

From one word, a new outlook

Learning about the history of the n-word changes students' attitudes.

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ST. PETERSBURG -- James Ham approached his history teacher with purpose.

The 17-year-old had found a topic for his group's history project. He held up a tan book that screamed its title in big black letters. *The N Word*.

Michelle Lockett took a deep breath.

The Gibbs High senior was filled with questions. Why was the word used so casually among his generation of African-Americans? Where did it even come from?

It took a minute for Lockett, who is white, to find words.

Her approval was the beginning of a five-month journey filled with spirited discussions, and a few surprises, that have changed attitudes at the racially diverse school of more than 2,000 students.

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It's a powerful word, with the ability to be a verbal atomic bomb or an easy way for rappers to connect with fans.

Civil rights leaders have tried to bury the word, even as young black kids resurrect it with a pound handshake and a "wassup my n-----."

Teens like James and his classmates -- Jo Scotti, Delores Milton and David Washington -- fall somewhere in between.

They attend an urban high school, where they say the word is delivered between acquaintances like text messages.

The group admits it is their age-group that most uses the word, whether in songs or among one another. But they blame ignorance. That's why their project was so important.

"The n-word has become just another word," said Jo, 16. "But we wanted to show that it didn't start out that way."

Lockett, the daughter of a Cuban immigrant, could understand why they wanted to explore the word. But she was apprehensive at first.

"I could have said 'No, you can't do that,'" Lockett said. "But ... we should never hinder a child because we, the adults, are uncomfortable with the questions they're asking."

The students spent hours scouring Library of Congress documents, reading *Washington Post* columnist Jabari Asim's book *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why*, and doing exhaustive Internet searches on the word's dichotomous existence.

Lockett watched as their attitudes shifted along the way. The project became a conversation among not just that small group, but the entire school.

"This is about getting people out of using a word they don't know anything about," Jo said.

The journey will culminate today, when the group present its eight-minute video at the National History Day competition in Largo. This year's theme is "Conflict and Compromise."

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Most scholars agree the n-word was derived from negro, a word Spaniards assigned to blacks they encountered in Africa. Early references by Dutch colonists in the United States spelled it *negar* or *neggar*.

But the Gibbs group wanted to go back even further.

According to Asim's book, "It was the name for an Egyptian God," said Jo, who has the word "vocab" written on his left hand in ink pen.

The group also was surprised to learn that the word was not always considered an insult. During the 1700s, it was merely a neutral noun used to describe a person of color.

"The process of time overall changed the word," James said. "It went through three or four stages of different meanings."

When plantation owners in the South began to use the word to refer to slaves, it took a turn for the worse.

Patrice Hubbard, 35, James' mom, recalls being called the n-word while riding her bike as a child in northeast St. Petersburg.

"He hasn't had to encounter that," said Hubbard, a St. Petersburg police officer. "But he's educated himself."

The students' video treads backward, beginning with examples of the modern interpretation of the word with snippets from the Cartoon Network show *Boondocks*, which uses the word liberally.

The video then flashes back to images of lynchings in the South to explain how the word began to subjugate blacks.

"We wanted to show how people have exploited the word and taken it and made it funny and profited off of it," Jo explained. "It's popular today and everybody watches those shows, but they don't know what it means."

As the project began to take shape, so did the students' own understanding. In the end, they all reached their own conclusions.

"It was more than just the grade," James said. "It was something we could relate to."

Jo and James have sworn off the word. Delores never used it much anyway, she said. And David, somewhat of a quiet radical in the group, has a completely different take.

"Before, I believed that not everyone could use it," said David, a receiver on the varsity football team. "Now I feel anybody can use it ... that makes it less about black people."

Luckett couldn't be happier.

"You always struggle as a teacher to teach life realities in a way that you allow a young person to discover their own voice," she said. "I might be partial, but I think they found theirs."

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